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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: KHOJA ON LEBANON: HARIRI MUST MOVE, SLEIMAN MUST
RESPOND

REF: A. BEIRUT 974
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 622

Classified By: CDA Ambassador Richard Erdman for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)
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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a meeting September 1 with Charge to discuss the stalled Lebanese government formation process, Minister of Culture and Information Khoja acknowledged the complexity of current political situation in Lebanon; observed it was time for Hariri to make a decision and for Sleiman to respond; and emphasized that improvement in Saudi-Syrian relations remained contingent on Syria's good behavior in Lebanon. Emphatically dismissing the idea that there might be a trilateral Saudi/Lebanese/Syria meeting on the margins of the September 23 KAUST University inauguration, Khoja said King Abdullah had forbidden any Saudi engagement with Syria on Lebanon, lest it make Saudi Arabia appear the demandeur and strengthen Syria as a regional power-broker. In Khoja's view, the most promising way to break the Lebanese government formation deadlock would be for the U.S. to communicate directly with Sleiman and urge him to accept whatever government list Hariri ultimately proposes. End Summary.

HARIRI HAS TO MAKE A DECISION

[1](#)2. (C) Khoja acknowledged the complexity of the current situation in Lebanon, noting that Aoun remained an obstacle but Hariri "had to take some steps and make a decision." Hariri had two options: form a government of technocrats, including members from outside the political parties, or form a government that reflected his view and vision for the country. Either option should include Hariri as PM, and exclude Gebran Bassil, as caving in to Aoun's demands would damage Hariri's credibility in the eyes of the Christian community. "How could he explain including Bassil-- who lost his election-- in the cabinet while excluding Boutros Harb, who won?," he asked rhetorically. Hariri should present a list to Sleiman, Khoja continued, and Sleiman should have to make a decision.

[1](#)3. (C) When asked if he or others in the SAG were advising Hariri as to which option to pursue, he wryly observed, "we don't like to interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs." Referring to a telephone conversation he had with Hariri that morning, in the wake of yesterday's meeting of majority MPs (ref A), Khoja said Hariri "was not depressed," that he was trying to shore up his position with his allies, but that "he cannot go farther" to accommodate Aoun's demands. If he did, he would face problems with his March 14 supporters. He was

constitutionally within his rights to refuse to offer a position to Bassil, and needed to stand his ground. Asked whether Hariri was considering Murr's proposal (Beirut 974), Khoja responded "I don't know what Saad will do, we'll see. If Saad can do it, I hope the President can accept it." Regarding Jumblatt, Khoja expressed confidence he was still supporting Hariri.

WE'RE NOT TALKING TO THE SYRIANS ABOUT LEBANON

14. (C) Khoja flatly dismissed the idea that the SAG was arranging, or even considering, a meeting of King Abdullah, President Sleiman, and Bashar Asad, along with Saad Hariri, on the margins of the September 23 KAUST University inauguration. "We did not think about that. KAUST is a special occasion, it will have nothing to do with politics." He also seemed genuinely non-plussed when asked to discuss his August 20 trip to Damascus (reported Damascus 622), claiming he had not traveled to Syria except "a long time ago." When Charge probed a bit more, noting he was certain he had seen some reference to an August visit, Khoja emphatically denied again that he had made such a visit. "Look," he said, "let me tell you something in confidence. We are not talking to the Syrians about Lebanon. The King has forbidden such discussions because the Syrians are trying to extract more from us. They want us to come to them and ask that they tell their allies in Lebanon to stand down and let the cabinet formation process move ahead." "We are not going to play this game," he continued, because it would make us the demandeur and strengthen Syria's role in the region as the real power-broker.

IMPROVED SAUDI-SYRIAN TIES LINKED

TO SYRIAN BEHAVIOR IN LEBANON

15. (C) Charge asked what the SAG's message to Syria was, noting that Khoja in the past had said the SAG had made clear there could not be progress in Saudi-Syrian relations without good behavior vis-a-vis Lebanon. The Saudi message to the Syrians had not changed, he said. The Syrians understood that improvements in their relationship with Saudi Arabia remained contingent upon good behavior in Lebanon. Despite this, they were using Aoun-- and Aoun was very obliging-- in order to block Lebanese government formation and put pressure on the Saudis. But the Saudis would not play their game, Khoja responded.

U.S.-SYRIAN ENGAGEMENT ALSO LINKED

TO SYRIAN BEHAVIOR, IN IRAQ AND LEBANON

16. (C) Charge said we were also now signaling to the Syrians that our ability to engage with them would depend on their behavior toward Lebanon as well as Iraq. Earlier, our focus had been on improved Syria behavior vis-a-vis Iraq, especially concerning the issue of foreign fighters entering Iraq through Syria. We had given less emphasis to the issue of Lebanon with them, because things had seemed to be moving in a positive direction, with their acceptance of the Lebanese election outcome, diplomatic recognition, exchange of ambassadors, etc. But now, it was clear they were using Lebanese allies like Aoun to prevent cabinet formation, and the delay was becoming an increasingly serious matter of concern. Summing up the U.S. approach, Charge said our policy was to support Lebanon's independence and sovereignty, to support Saad Hariri's efforts to complete the cabinet formation process as soon as possible, but also to ensure it was achieved in a way that did not undermine Saad's ability to govern once in office.

U.S. SHOULD TALK TO SLEIMAN

17. (C) Asked what actions might help break the deadlock Khoja suggested the U.S. should convey a message to Sleiman, urging him to accept Hariri's proposal and "not let Saad down." He said Hariri was reluctant to present a proposal because he was not confident Sleiman- or Syria- would accept it. The message could be conveyed by any means, he said, but it needed to be conveyed soon. He believed that Sleiman's acceptance of Hariri's proposal would be good for Hariri, and by extension good for Lebanon, as it would show that he was able to govern independently. Charge said he would pass this suggestion on to Washington.

ERDMAN